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The Stealth of Deaver's Questions

Michael K. Deaver was transformed from door-opener de luxe to unguided lobbying missile in March when he submitted to budget director James Miller technical questions involving national security secrets that sought to compare the existing B-1 bomber with its successor, the still classified Stealth bomber.

Those questions are in the hands of a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee that conducts its first closed-door session today. They went unanswered by Miller.

But no longer can it be claimed that ex-White House aide Deaver was not an active lobbyist in behalf of Rockwell International's efforts to build additional B-1 bombers.

It was the revelation of Deaver's March visit to Miller's office next door to the White House that triggered the spreading investigation. He has denied violating federal law that prohibits ex-officials from lobbying their former agencies for two years; Deaver insisted he did not consider Miller's Office of Management and Budget part of the White House. Deaver has called his meeting with Miller "informational."

What he did not say is that he was seeking highly sensitive "information" at OMB. Rockwell International supplied him a list of questions that could be construed as an argument for the B-1 against the Stealth. According to two separate sources who have read the questions, the last several ones concerned Stealth performance and contained classified national security information.

Deaver alerted Miller during their meeting that he would submit questions in writing, an OMB official told us, and the budget chief made no response. Nor were the questions answered after Deaver submitted them. In any event, according to a nongovernment source familiar with the Deaver-Rockwell relationship, Deaver handed Miller the questions as he left. But an official source said they were sent to the OMB director later. In any event, Miller was not capable of answering the questions, and such information would not conceivably have been supplied him by the Pentagon under need-to-know regulations.

Deaver's office said it would not respond to questions until after the House hearing. A Rockwell spokesman in Washington said the company prepared the list "to help familiarize" Deaver with "the nation's bomber fleet'" adding that "there was clearly no intention that the questions be used to obtain classified data." An OMB spokesman stressed that Deaver's questions went unanswered. "There are no embarrassing questions, only embarrassing answers," he said.

The image of Mike Deaver, the most skilled political advance man of the '80s who became famous fulfilling the needs of the Reagans, juggling military secrets testifies to his trouble filling his new role as military lobbyist. He was in the wrong office saying the wrong things to the wrong man. Nor did Rockwell contract to pay what one company official estimated as a $250,000 retainer for nuts-and-bolts lobbying with Cabinet-level officials. It wanted somebody to open the Oval Office door.

For the past two decades, Rockwell International has been punctilious in its Washington operations. But the company's future was at risk in the B-1 vs. Stealth struggle, which has split the national defense community. Northrop clearly was winning.

So, when Rockwell's chairman and chief executive officer, Robert W. Anderson, last year noted Deaver was leaving the White House, he wanted to retain the man who clearly had not cut his intimate ties with the White House. But the notion of Mike Deaver going into the Oval Office to get the president to persuade Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to overrule his Pentagon and build extra B-1 bombers suggests a CEO fantasy world.

There is no sign Deaver even tried getting Anderson a presidential audience. According to insiders, he specialized in giving Rockwell "strategic" advice about Cap Weinberger's importance and the need to contact key congressional figures. That produced grumbling inside Rockwell that he was not earning his keep.

Deaver's visit to OMB was his own idea, Rockwell insiders told us. The trouble is he really didn't know much about bomber technology or defense procurement.

So, when Deaver asked for something on paper to show Miller, the telltale questions were retrieved from the Rockwell files. The super advance man, of whom it was said by associates that he would not know substance if it hit him in the face, had blundered into Pentagon high-tech when what his clients really wanted was some doors opened—one in particular.

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